

Meaning: A Road to Quine's Theory

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Abstract: The meaning holistic ideas were introduced into analytic philosophy in the early 1950s in work by Carl Gustav Hempel in 1950 and Willard Van Orman Quine in 1951. Both of them were concerned with the meaning of theoretical sentences within the formulation of a scientific theory. Hempel articulated an idea of interdependence among expressions. They have stated that, to know the meaning of a hypothesis within an empirical language, we have to know not merely what observational sentences it entails alone or in conjunction with subsidiary hypothesis, but also we have to know what non-observational, empirical sentences are entailed by it. Then one would be able to confirm or disconfirm the theory. According to Quine to get a meaning of a statement we have to understand the meaning of the whole body of statements because the meaning of the statement depends upon the bundle of other related statements which belongs to a system. So Quine rejected the logical positivist's atomistic view of meaning theory. Conclusively he introduced a new theory of meaning which is called holistic like such as moderate and radical holism.

Keywords: Meaning-Holism, Semantics, Positivism, Observation, Empiricism, Reference etc.

Introduction:

The term meaning holism stands for a semantic thesis. According to this thesis meaning accrues to the whole body of sentences and not to the single sentences. According to Quine to get a meaning of a statement we have to understand the meaning of the whole body of statements because the meaning of the statement depends upon the bundle of other related statements which belongs to a system. So Quine rejected the logical positivist's atomistic view of meaning theory. Conclusively he introduced a new theory of meaning which is called holistic like such as moderate and radical holism.

Quine's Theories of Meaning:

According to Quine, there are only three plausible theories of meaning. These are as follows:

- a. Reference theory of meaning.
- b. Mentalist theory of meaning.
- c. Intentional theory of meaning.

According to him, reference theory of meaning is one in which meaning of the word refers to that for which the word stands for. So Quine introduces a new theory of reference that is held to avoid the problem of the simple denotation theory. There are two types of reference theories; these are as follows:

- a. (1) Causal theory of reference.
- a. (2) Direct reference theory.

According to Quine, when the references identify the relation between words and objects it is called causal theory of reference. But when the object or property referred to just is the meaning of the expression, the reference relation is not explained

by way of ostensive definition or some special causal relation. Here both approaches are free from the notion of necessary relation involving some kind of mental act. But according to Frege, meaning is sense which is different from reference.

According to Quine, when meaning is a mental entity it is called mentalist theory of meaning. Again Quine thought that if this is the case then communication would be impossible, because meaning would be subjective, private and arbitrary.

According to Quine when the meaning is an intentional entity it is called intentional theory of meaning.¹

Holistic Theory of Meaning:

According to the common view, meaning holism (MH) is the thesis that what a linguistic expression means depends on its relations to many or all other expressions within the same totality.

Meaning holism is a theory which brings out the conceptual or relations between expression in a language. The term meaning holism stands for a semantic thesis. According to this thesis meaning accrues to the whole body of sentences and not to the single sentences.

The meaning holistic ideas were introduced into analytic philosophy in the early 1950s in work by Carl Gustav Hempel in 1950 and Willard Van Orman Quine in 1951. Both of them were concerned with the meaning of theoretical sentences within the formulation of a scientific theory. Hempel articulated an idea of interdependence among expressions. They have

¹ Ibid, pp.18.20.

stated that, to know the meaning of a hypothesis within an empirical language, we have to know not merely what observational sentences it entails alone or in conjunction with subsidiary hypothesis, but also we have to know what no

observational, empirical sentences are entailed by it. Then one would be able to confirm or disconfirm the theory.²

Different Views of Holism:

According to Hempel, the holism is called confirmation holism or epistemological holism. Hempel's idea was a way of accounting both theatrical sentences as well as observational sentence together. It is sometime called confirmation holism or epistemological holism.

According to Wilfrid Sellars, the meaning of an expression is determined by the set of rules governing the kinds of 'moves' that can be made with it in the game. He says that there are three kinds of move;

- a). Language entry moves (which lead from observation to the acceptance of a sentence).
- b). Intra-language moves (which are inferential transitions from sentences to a sentence).
- c). Language exit moves (which lead from accepted sentences to action).

Sellar's view is that sameness of meaning consists in sameness of role in a language game.

Harman and others have defended conceptual role or inferential role semantics. In a narrower sense, inferential role semantics is concerned with the meaning of sentences only, and identifies it with its role in a set of correct or accepted inference patterns, whereas conceptual role semantics is concerned also with sub-sentential expressions and with their roles not only in inferences proper, but also roles in relation to perception and action.

According to Harman and Block, the theories are concerned with mental language, which is a system of mental representations having its own syntax like structure. Again, the holistic element consists in the idea that the conceptual role of a mental reorientation relates it directly or indirectly to all or at least many other mental representations in the same system, and meaning is determined by the conceptual role.³

²Peter Pagin, "Meaning Holism" in, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of language*, (ed) by E. Lepore and B. Smith Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.213-215.

³Mask Greenberg and Gilbert Harman, "Conceptual Role Semantics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, (ed.) by E. Lepore and B. Smith, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 295-298.

According to Donald Davidson's, theory of radical interpretation a correct semantic theory for the language of a particular speaker is a theory that results from methodologically correct interpretation of the utterances of that speaker. Such interpretation is holistic in the sense that only whole theories can be tested by the interpretation method.⁴

According to Wittgenstein, the use of language explains what language is all about. He says that understanding the language means understanding the rule as well as the purposes of linguistic activities, purposive activities etc. so Wittgenstein says:

"What we call "understanding language" is often like understanding we get of a calculus when we learn its history or its practical application. And there too we meet an easily survivable symbolism instead of one that is strange to us. Imagine that someone had originally learnt chess as a writing game. And was later shown the "interpretation" of chess as a board game. In this case "'to understand' means something like 'to take in as a whole'"⁵

Wittgenstein says that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language". A word is fully functional when it is operating in a sentence. It is because in the sentence it is used according to rules. Wittgenstein defends a form of meaning holism.⁶

Quine's Theory of Meaning Holism:

According to Quine, "the meaning of the individual expression depends on the totality to which they belongs is called meaning holism". Thus under Quinean holism, the knowledge of the content of a sentence requires knowledge of the entire language to which the sentence belongs.

For example: suppose we want to know the meaning of 'snow', then first we have to know some related sentences in which the word 'snow' is used.

Quine suggested that the cognitive output is stored in language and the sensory output is distributed throughout the discourse. So there is no compartmentalization involved in understanding meaning. Therefore meaning goes holistic.⁷

Types of Meaning Holism by Quine:

⁴ Donald Davidson, *Inquirees into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, pp.220-223

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1953, pp.21-30.

⁶ R. C. Pradhan, *Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy*, ICPR, New Delhi, 2001, pp.238-241.

⁷ Michael Dummett and Richard G. Heck, Jnr. (ed.), *Language, Thought, and logic*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.71-80.

According to Quine, basically holism can be divided into two kinds:

4.1a. Moderate Holism:

According to Quine, a speaker is always in the position of someone who hears a sentence not all of whose words he knows, then he guess the meaning thereby having a conjectural understanding of the sentences.

For example: suppose a beggar is putting his hand on his belly so here we can understand that perhaps he is hungry, so we give some food or money.

Therefore in this context, we can understand the whole thing about a beggar without asking him any other things.

4.1b. Radical Holism:

According to Quine, a speaker wants to know the meaning of the term but he cannot understand the meaning of the term. So in this context he has to understand the meaning of the term by understanding the meaning of the sentence to which the term belongs.

Radical Holism holds that no word can have any meaning except in the sentence which has meaning. Only sentences have meaning.⁸

Argument for the Meaning Holism:

Quine's confirmation holism brings in verifications as an argument for meaning holism. This argument is that verification is not piece-meal but holistic. There are two related arguments which have been presented by Fodor and Lepore. The first one is that inferential role semantics is holistic. The second one is belief holism with respect to beliefs.

The following are the arguments for meaning holism:

- a. The meaning of an expression is at partially constituted by the expressions' inferential relations.
- b. There is no principle for distinguishing between those of its inferential relations that constitute the meaning of an expression and those that does not constitute the meaning of an expression.
- c. Here the meaning of an expression is constituted by all of its inferential relations hence by its entire role in a language.

Therefore, the argument is that meaning holism provides the only way of securing standard meanings which are derived from the inferential relations of the expressions in a language.

Argument against the Meaning Holism:

There are two main arguments against the meaning holism. These are as follows:

⁸ Ibid, pp.83-88.

6a. Dummett's language learning argument.

According to Dummett, if meaning holism is true, then a language cannot be learnt incrementally, since learning is always of the small part of the language. And Dummett says, one cannot know the meaning of any expression by knowing the entire language. And this argument concludes that if we cannot learn language incrementally then it is a mystery that language can be ever learnt at all.

6b. Fodor and Lepore's instability or totality change arguments and also meaning holism is incompatible with semantic compositionality.

According to Fodor and Lepore there are three arguments against meaning holism. These are extracted by from the total change thesis.

6b (i) Two people cannot disagree on anything, and they cannot agree on anything unless they agree on everything or disagree on everything. This makes communication impossible except between persons that agree on every belief anyway, and therefore don't need it.

6b. (ii) One person cannot change his mind about anything, for changing one's mind also change the content of the belief.

6b. (iii) Because of these facts, we cannot make true intentional generalizations, and hence no good intentional explanations.

6c. The compositionality argument:

Meaning is compositional rather than holistic, because the meaning of a sentence follows from the meanings of the words which compose the sentence.⁹

Objections to Quinean Holism:

Quine's Holism is criticized by some philosophers, according to Dummett, Quinean holism can be criticized is different ways.

1. Impossibility of Communication.

Communication is possible only with the help of individual expressions and not by the whole language.

2. The possibility of theory of meaning:

Holism denies the possibility of a theory of meaning. The theory of meaning attempts to explain the way in which we contrive to represent the reality by means of language but in holism it is not possible. Because in the holistic view we cannot grasp the representative power of any one sentence, accepts as a fact of the whole.

3. The Rationality of Language:

The rationality of language lies in to use by responsible speaks who have mastered the

⁹ Ibid, pp. 91- 100.

language. But this requires piece-meal mastery of language but not whole body of language at a time. Holism makes language irrational.²³

Conclusion

The following principles can be defended in a meaning theory:

1. The distinct elements are integrally related in a system so it must be analyzed of a whole and it cannot be understood as separable atomistic bits.
2. The rationality is understood as the coherence of events or beliefs, such that single beliefs or events are

neither rational nor irrational in themselves.

3. The mental events or propositional attitudes are involved with a web of beliefs. So meaning is not only the holistic in nature but belief is also the holistic in nature.¹⁰

¹⁰Nancy K. Franken berry and Hans H. Penner (ed.), *Language, Truth and Religious Belief*, Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion, American Academy of Religion (AAR), Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1999, pp. 413-416.

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